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ABSTRACT

Low income parents from diverse ethnic groups and geographical locations express their hopes to be directly related to the success their children can achieve in school. This paper considers ways in which the standpoint of low income parents might be recognized and respected in public schools. There are many obstacles that stand in the way of parental participation in schools. Many parents feel they do not know enough to help; that they are to blame for their children's problems; that they do not know how to ask the right questions; or that they are not really needed. Schools can adopt many strategies to reduce the disparity between what low income parents and middle class parents can achieve for their children. Offering childcare and transportation, providing translators, and holding evening parent-teacher meetings are just some of the ways schools can adapt. Schools administrators have the resources and power to initiate effective parent-teacher cooperation. The health and welfare of society is dependent upon understanding the barriers erected by classist bias and in finding ways to eliminate them from institutional life. (Contains 40 references.) (JDM)

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Recognizing and Welcoming the Standpoint of Low-Income Parents in the Public Schools

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In a previous paper (Lott, 2001a), I examined how low-income parents tend to be responded to in the public schools. An analysis of the literature revealed that little had changed in the last few decades with respect to teacher and administrator beliefs about low-income parents or their children. The calls for school-parent partnerships seem to be mainly for those between schools and "nice" middle-class parents, and the tendency to pathologize low-income families and to see them as "other," deficient, and problematic continues. Low-income parents are generally perceived by educators as resistant to school efforts to involve them, as poor participators in school events, and as not as committed to their children's school achievement and success as middle-class parents. And it continues to be true, as noted by Holloway, et al (1995, p. 452), that "in spite of decades of research on impoverished families, only rarely do we hear the voices of the women [and men] as they articulate the principles that guide them in raising their children."

The dominant beliefs about low-income parents and the responses of school personnel to these parents in words and actions have the effect of discounting their views and diminishing their value. In addition, these words and actions appear to mirror well what low-income parents experienced earlier when

they were students. Research findings suggest, however, that despite the relative powerlessness of low-income parents, they continue to express concern for the academic achievement of their children and continue to seek involvement in their children's schooling (Lott, 2001a).

In attempting to impact the school experiences of their children, low-income parents face an uphill battle. As noted by Lareau (1989), middle-class parents, because of their resources and warmer welcome, are often able to mediate "customized or individualized" school careers for their children, while low-income parents can only gain "generic" or undifferentiated educational paths for theirs. Data from her ethnographic study led her to conclude that while working-class families experience separation from the schools, "interconnectedness between family life and school life" (p. 8) is more likely to be true of middle-class families.

In the present paper, I concentrate on "prescriptions for change," ways in which the standpoint of low-income parents might be recognized and respected in our schools, assuming that we care about low-income communities. This assumption can be questioned, given all the ways in which our mainstream society distances from and punishes the poor (Lott, 2001b). Yet, there have

been some significant efforts on the part of educators to enter into partnerships with low-income parents based on the recognition that they "have human resources that are worthwhile" (Heckman & Peterman, 1996, p. 319). And a resolution on poverty passed by the American Psychological Association's Council of Representatives (American Psychological Association, 2000), holds out possibilities for change in status quo reactions to social class, and calls for a sustained focus on ways to reduce or eliminate inequities and injustice. It is in that spirit that I discuss some strategies that schools can adopt to reduce the disparity between what middle-class parents and low-income parents can achieve for their children.

Replace Stereotypes with Recognition of Strengths

Many studies find that when low-income parents from diverse ethnic groups and geographical locations in the U.S. are asked directly about hopes and dreams for their children, they invariably relate these to the success their children can achieve in school (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Lareau, 1989; Reynolds & Gill, 1994; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Wood & Baker, 1999). This is the case even when they recognize that this route may not "actually work for them" (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1996, p. 199),

and when they do not voice much trust in the schools. Nevertheless, they continue to hope because, as most of the Chicano parents said to an interviewer in a study in southwest Texas (Delgado & Ford, 1998, p. 474), "their children were lo mas importante en mi vida."

Even when the parents' descriptions of their own schooling are largely reports of negative experiences, they continue to believe "in the 'American dream' of self-betterment through education" (Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Pierola, 1995, p. 462). The low-income mothers in this study in Boston expressed the belief that social mobility could be achieved through education, and cited good reasons why they thought schooling "was crucial to their children's future" (p. 462). Similarly, Latino parents interviewed in another study in Boston (Levine & Trickett, 2000) said they believed the schools could facilitate for their children their goals of economic success, moral uprightness, and a happy family life. But many low-income parents, like the African American mothers of middle-school children interviewed in a study in Baltimore (Cook & Fine, 1995), try to walk a fine line between their belief in the importance of school and their fear that the schools will kill their children's spirit, a fear stemming from their own experiences (Webster-Stratton, 1997).

Heckman and Peterman (1996) urge the schools to accept two fundamental principles. The first is that children and their families constitute positive resources and are the foundation for educational development. The second is that these families must be encouraged and given the opportunity to participate fully in the educational process. But, these principles are at odds with typical assumptions that low-income parents are inadequate, have few assets to contribute to their children's education, do not value education, and teach undesirable values that need to be replaced (Harry, 1992; Keller & McDade, 2000; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). School personnel need to shake off deeply seated assumptions reinforced by the mass media that present a "monolithic caricature" of families in poverty (Reynolds & Gill, p. 685). The image of inferior families that need to be "fixed" in order to override their deficits (Gadsden, 1998) is present in the ideologies of both political conservatives and liberals (Foley, 1997).

A team of community psychologists that worked for one year as consultants to a Chicago elementary school (Good, et al, 1997, p. 285) reported that the school administrators and teachers focused on parental deficits, expressing concern "that parents did not feed their children properly, get them to

bed on time, or help them with their homework." The team concluded that the administrators and teachers "highlighted parental inadequacies or incompetencies, infrequently mentioning strengths." Such thinking makes it difficult to welcome the involvement of low-income parents. To see them as "unique stakeholders and contributors to their children's education" (p. 294), the team concluded, requires that the parents' strengths be recognized.

Polakow (1995, p. 268) has presented a cynical but compelling explanation for why it is so difficult to change these negative assumptions and perceptions about the poor among educators and human service providers. She argues that

> countless middle-class people in the human service professions have built their careers as the direct beneficiaries of poverty. ... [D]eficit images [are] actively disseminated in the college classrooms of teacher training institutions, ...in educationalinstitutes and ... by major grant organizations...[D]iagnosis and remediation are the essential ingredients of a proliferating deficit/pathology business, nuanced by color and class codes.

Countering the assumptions that sustain the "pathology business" is difficult but essential, and is work that we psychologists can do.

Help Parents Deal with Obstacles to School Participation

Parents, but especially low-income parents, have significantly fewer resources relevant to their children's education than teachers and school administrators. From her work with three urban school districts, Fine (1993) identified a number of obstacles that stand in the way of parental participation in the schooling of their children. Many parents feel (1) that they do not know enough to be helpful; (2) that they cannot ask the "right" questions; (3) that they are blamed for their children's problems at school; and/or (4) that their collaboration is not <u>really</u> appreciated. Low-income parents tend to justifiably believe that the schools are outside the sphere of their influence (Harry, 1992).

Lareau (1989) observed how differently working-class and middle-class parents behaved when visiting their children's classrooms. While the former tended to stand at the door and hesitate, waiting to be noticed, the latter did not knock before entering, did not hesitate, walked directly into a room, and moved about freely. Social class shapes this differential parent behavior in the schools. Differing sharply from their children's teachers in education, income, and

occupational status, low-income parents typically lack confidence that they can "understand, challenge, and face teachers as equals," seeing school, instead, as "an alien world" (Lareau, 1989, p. 112). In a later study, Lareau (1996, p. 59) observed that whereas middle-income parents called teachers and administrators by name, low-income parents "virtually always described individual educators as 'the school' ," illustrating well the psychological distance being experienced.

Negatively affecting the relations of low-income parents with the schools, and increasing their feelings of isolation (Yon, Nesbit, & Algozzine, 1998), is that the resources of these parents are not only few in number but also tenuous and easily disrupted. The economic facts of poverty (Lott & Bullock, 2001) are inevitably coupled with problems of health, job insecurity, crime, disruptions due to fire and evictions, and childcare and transportation difficulties. Statistics provided by The Children's Defense Fund (2000) attest to a seldom-discussed phenomenon, the frequency with which low-income families move and the frequency with which poor children change schools. Among former welfare recipients, those unable to pay rent were found to be twice as likely than others to report that their children changed schools in the past six months. Even more

obstacles are faced by parents with limited proficiency in English and immigrants fearing discovery of undocumented status (Levine & Trickett, 2000). Advocacy for their children is severely limited for parents who are not facile with the English language. Fine (1993, p. 688) reminds us that low-income parents, especially mothers, do a "fragile balancing act", and that when this "falls apart, everyone blames them." What is not acknowledged, she argues, is that they "are holding together the pieces of a society torn apart by a federal government that...has shown disdain for and has severely punished those living in poverty."

Many investigators have reported that low-income parents often have developed skepticism about or a lack of trust in the schools their children attend (Cook & Fine, 1995; Harr, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1996; Holloway, et al, 1995). Some note that parents may fear reprisals from teachers against their children if they are too vocal in expressing criticism or making suggestions (Levine & Trickett, 2000). Others point to a possible reluctance on the part of low-income parents to talk with their children's teachers about areas in which they could use help because they "may assume, often correctly" that they will be judged as being inadequate parents (Keller & McDade, 2000, p. 304).

Related to this reluctance to discuss problems is a phenomenon that has been the subject of some recent study. There is evidence that people who experience discrimination may hesitate calling attention to this or attributing any failures to it because of the "social costs." People who complain about discrimination or unfair treatment may "risk being labeled as hypersensitive, emotional, and generally unpleasant" (Kaiser & Miller, 2001, p. 255). It is no wonder, then, that Latino parents in one study (Levine & Trickett, 2000) who perceived discrimination on the part of school personnel felt resentful and distrustful but helpless to complain or intervene.

Solutions to some of the problems encountered by low-income parents are straight-forward and have been summarized by Levine and Trickett (2000, p. 133): "offering child care, transportation, and evening times for parent-teacher conferences; providing translators and bilingual school personnel; and enhancing cultural sensitivity of school personnel through professional development activities." While the schools cannot provide low-income parents with paid leave or flexible hours to attend meetings, they can offer parents times to do so when they are not at work (Heymann & Earle, 2000). As noted by Yon, et al (1998, p. 81), "Many workers cannot take time off from work for fear of losing either much

needed wages, or even their jobs." Two successful programs in which Head Start mothers attended a class on math learning preparation (Starkey & Klein, 2000) provided childcare, help with transportation by arranging carpools, and encouraged sending a substitute family member to the class when the mother could not attend.

Expand Parental Roles in the Schools

If parental involvement in the schools is meant to include the involvement of all parents, regardless of social class and ethnicity, parents cannot be perceived as adversaries or sources of disruption. Their role in the schools must go beyond signing permission slips or temporary crisis-intervention, and be a permanent voice that is welcomed and actually heard (Fine, 1993). As Harry et al (1996, p. 200) note, genuine dialogue can only be achieved if professionals are "willing to give credence to parents' opinions."

Some investigators have pointed out that parents can be particularly helpful as sources of knowledge about their children, a source not routinely tapped by schools (Dickinson & DeTemple, 1998). Parents can report on their children's strengths that teachers and standardized assessments often miss. "Because they are based on long-term observation of their child's inclinations

and aptitudes, parental reports provide a type of information that cannot be obtained from tests" (p. 256). Acknowledging such parental expertise on the part of low-income as well as middle-income parents expresses trust and respect. The knowledge brought to the classroom by low-income students is different from that brought by more affluent students but is equally valuable. The same is true for their parents. An effort should be made to "build on that knowledge, rather than obliterating or replacing it" (Heckman & Peterman,1996, p. 321).

Parents have traditionally been expected to sign notes, to volunteer for bake sales or other PTO money raising projects, and to monitor their children's homework. But while middle-class parents are also sometimes seen as sources of special expertise, advice, or information about careers or travel, low-income parents are rarely approached to share their skills, experiences and wisdom. Instead, schools typically try to "involve" low-income parents by offering "parent-training" sessions led by professionals that are designed to "help" or "improve" them. Such efforts, however, reflect insensitivity and paternalism and turn out to be a poor strategy for helping parents feel confident and welcome (Simoni & Adelman,1993). They also fail to take advantage of the positive contributions that parents can make by sharing the realities of their experiences and histories.

Parents are sometimes encouraged to serve as classroom aides or room parents, but "such roles limit participation to those who work inside the home or have optimally flexible schedules" and imply that "parents are useful only within an agenda set by school personnel" (Good, et al, 1997). Parents themselves can be involved in thinking of new and realistic ways in which they can be involved and studies invariably find that parents appreciate being asked for their opinions and advice (Levine & Trickett, 2000).

Some teacher-parent projects described in the literature do approach family cultures positively. These encourage mutual exchange of information, do not operate with the teachers as "knowers" and parents as "receivers," and may also include the students. Gadsen (1998, p. 35) has written about one eighth grade classroom in which parents, students, and the teacher worked together to develop a plan for "expeditions, reading activities, and problem-solving tasks that centered on their own family cultures." Another program in a low-income community in Virginia (Binford & Robertson, 1996, p. 227) expanded the role of parents beyond the usual field trip or school activity chaperone to include "direct contributions to program development and assessment" that were welcomed and implemented.

Expand Opportunities for Informal Communication

Along with expanding the roles low-income parents can play in the schools, greater opportunities should be provided to communicate with school personnel. Investigators consistently report that informal contacts are preferred and are more likely to be used by low-income parents than formal, institutionalized events like scheduled meetings. Whereas teachers are likely to communicate with parents when there are problems or failures to be discussed, parents are also eager to see signs of success or good experiences on the part of their children, which they are more likely to see by visiting classrooms. Snow, et al (1991, p. 173) urge that parents "be made to feel that they have the right to visit their children's school and to talk to the principal and the teachers" and that they are welcome in the classrooms.

Parents in one study (Good et al, 1997) reported feeling that their children's school was an unfriendly and not welcoming place, citing locked doors and restricted parking. Racist experiences and White parent leadership of the PTO also contributed to the discomfort and feeling of not being really wanted reported by the African American parents. In another study of low-income parents (Levine & Trickett, 2000, p. 129), those who said they found the school

not welcoming talked of having "been ignored, treated disrespectfully, or offered...token gestures...without addressing their concerns adequately." The parents who did feel welcome talked of having been invited to school events, of having been listened to and treated respectfully, having a teacher who was accessible and spoke Spanish, and being asked for their opinions. As argued by one educator, parents should "feel not only welcome, but needed" (Comer, 1990, p. 37).

For school-parent programs to be successful, parents must feel welcome in their children's schools and invited to visit informally (Gadsden, 1998). Parents who are not made to feel comfortable in informal interactions with school personnel are less likely to acquire such useful information as the availability of tutors, special testing, other resources, or the principal's availability for private talks about a child's academic progress

(Lareau, 1989). An open-school, open-classroom policy is especially important for low-income parents because they are far less likely than middle-class parents to run into their children's teachers in out-of-school middle-class settings like restaurants and shops.

Those in Power Must Take the Initiative

School administrators have the advantage of status and resources and need to initiate effective parent-teacher cooperation. It is the responsibility of those who run our schools and guide educational policy to recognize that schools are not neutral environments (Ayers, 1997), and to make whatever changes are necessary to reduce the role they play in maintaining classism. We do not have laws that negatively sanction schools for providing a hostile climate for non middle-class children and their parents but the consequences of such a hostile climate are no less serious than those stemming from a hostile climate based on gender. Classism, like sexism, permeates our society and is not limited to the schools, but there are steps that those with educational power can take to reduce the costs and stigma of low-income and offer more hopeful expectations.

Low-income parents, like more affluent ones, must be made welcome, encouraged to speak openly about their views and experiences, and brought into genuine decision making positions. This requires perceiving them as valuable members of the school community, not as carriers of dysfunctionality and disadvantage whose children are "at risk." There is risk to the children of low-

income families from their being labeled this way by their teachers and having their parents dismissed as less than worthy and as inadequate.

Necessary for school participation by low-income parents is respect and a serious commitment to include them in decision making (Anderson, 1999). As noted by Wood and Baker (1999, p. 245), schools "need to emphasize their respect for individual, cultural, and ethnic differences among families and work intentionally to build inclusive school communities." Some successful projects have been devised to constructively utilize the talents and insights of low-income parents. One (Heckman & Peterman, 1996) organized "cafecitas," meetings with coffee and rolls for informal talk as well as more formal symposia at which parents and teachers dealt with specific topics. Similarly, one school established a Parent Center that provides daily activities on a drop-in basis (Binford & Robertson, 1996). Another project (Simoni & Adelman, 1993) supported a parents' group run by the parents themselves in which they discussed the personal and institutional barriers they faced and shared solutions. Low-income parents need to learn from each other about their rights and about strategies that will better enable them to interact with the school system (Harry, 1992). A Partners Program that included parents, teachers, and family service workers

(Webster-Stratton, 1997) proved to have consequences for both parents and teachers. Parents became more involved in school activities, and teachers "contacted, communicated with, and supported parents more often" (p. 163).

The use of liaisons between school personnel and parents is often mentioned in the description of successful programs. They make contact with parents to find out about obstacles faced in participating in the schools and explore reasonable solutions and resources for assistance (Starkey & Klein, 2000). Where language separates parents from school personnel, it is the responsibility of the schools to provide translators, bilingual teachers, and/ or a liaison or coordinator who speaks the language of the parents (Levine & Trickett, 2000). The importance of home visits by teachers has also been stressed as a means of "facilitating transmittal of information in both directions" (Snow, et al, 1991, p. 170). Teachers and parents find that they have shared objectives and each learns about what the other can contribute to the school success of their children. Other initiatives with positive outcomes that have been mentioned in the literature include a weekly newsletter to parents and a telephone tree through which parents communicate with others about events or mutual concerns (Good, et al, 1997).

The relative absence of attention to issues of diversity in many teacher training programs (Guyton, 2000; Polakow, 1993) means that school districts must offer on-the-job professional development programs in order to address biased assumptions, cultural sensitivity and respect, the realities of class and ethnic discrimination, and school inequities. Such sessions are part of efforts to increase school and parent collaboration (Binford & Robertson, 1996; Levine & Trickett, 2000).

Some discussions of school initiatives in low-income communities have gone beyond the issue of respect and raised the challenging subjects of social justice and the need for power to be shared with parents. Guyton (2000) argues that teachers must be prepared to teach all children and must understand that "Voice is critical to social justice" (p. 111). Newman, Hagdorn, Celano, & Daly (1995, p. 822) go further and note that:

> establishing a <u>posture of reciprocity</u> between parents and professionals may require a delicate shift in the balance of power between schools and communities. This power shift must be founded on a basic respect for families, their knowledge and beliefs and their cultural communities...But mutual respect is not enough: groups with

diverse agendas need to identify shared goals and devise strategies for successful implementation.

Final Thoughts

We cannot assume that educators see the school success of low-income children and the satisfaction of their parents to be as important as that of more affluent children. There is merit to the gloomy and cynical argument that the perpetuation of poorly educated adults is necessary to fill the ranks of the secondary labor market of low wages, no benefits, and no job advancement. There are some educators who recognize "the sobering reality...that when it comes to both color and class, U. S. schools tend to conform much more to the contours of American society than they transform it" (Rist, 200, p. 260). But this is not an often heard argument. Instead, teachers and principals tend to complain about how difficult it is to engage low-income parents in cooperating with school programs, how "different" low-income parents are in values and aspirations, and how many problems they present to the schools.

Educators seldom call public attention to the adaptive skills or "uncommon resilience of common folks" (Levine & Trickett, 2000, p. 135), nor do they seem to try hard to "hear the voices of the poor" (Rist, 2000, p. 265). This paper

challenges such narrow vision and presents a set of pragmatic strategies to change the prevailing state of affairs. I remain hopeful despite the resistance that many of us experience in trying to effect change in our local school districts (Lott, 2001a).

My personal appreciation of the resilience of low-income parents was sharpened by a recent focus group discussion conducted with a small group of ethnically mixed women enrolled in a special "Family Independence Program" in Rhode Island. This program trains low-income parents receiving financial assistance to become "case managers." One major theme that emerged from the parent's stories was how often they had to cope with environmental damage to their children's health, as with lead poisoning, that had serious implications for school progress. Another major theme was how eager the schools seemed to be to suggest diagnostic labels for their children and to encourage medication as the best treatment for their children's problems in school. Much as I thought I already knew about low-income experiences, this discussion provided additional insights and challenges.

Fine (1993) suggests that enriched educational outcomes will follow when parents organize and schools are restructured to envision "educational

democracies of difference" (p. 707). At the same time we must strive to understand the difficulty that many members of the middle-class have in recognizing the nature of their privileged "standpoint," and in feeling genuine respect for those who do not share it (Ehrenreich, 1989). I see this as one of the major challenges of a psychology committed to social justice. The health and welfare of large numbers of us is vitally dependent upon understanding the barriers erected by classist bias and finding ways to eliminate them from all spheres of interpersonal and institutional life.

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